

Thanks, Jim

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On Wednesday, the Senate paid its respects to Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., on the occasion of his retirement from that legislative body. Well, some of the Senate did. Most Republican members stayed away from Jeffords' valedictory address, a courtesy the Senate extends to all retiring members.

Only one Republican, Charles Grassley of Iowa, spoke on his behalf. He did out of mutual respect, since Grassley and Jeffords are the last members of the Republican class of 1974 still serving in Congress. They were two of only 17 freshman GOP House members elected that year, a year that saw 75 new Democrats sweep into Congress as voters expressed their disgust with the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon.

The Republican Party has never forgiven Jeffords for the act that will ultimately define his long political career -- his decision in May 2001 to leave the party and become an independent.

It was a move that was on the surface, uncharacteristic. Jeffords has long had a reputation for being a low-profile politician who rarely strays from the middle of the road on most issues. But he departed the GOP without rancor in a move that had more to do with his political principles than personal hubris.

"I was not elected to this office to be something I am not," Jeffords said at the time in his formal announcement, invoking the names of Republicans who preceded him as Vermont's senators -- men such as Ernest Gibson, Ralph Flanders, George Aiken and Robert Stafford.

Those names represent a Republican Party that no longer exists -- a party of moderation, common sense and a desire to put the needs of Vermonters ahead of partisan politics.

Gibson's career in the Senate was short, but as governor in the years after the end of World War II, he helped to begin the transformation of Vermont from forgotten backwater into a progressive state. Flanders was among the first senators to take on Joe McCarthy and his reckless witch hunt for alleged communists in the government. Aiken served six terms in the Senate and was the man who helped create the School Lunch Program and the St. Lawrence Seaway. If you are a college student, you've heard of Stafford -- he was the senator who created the low-interest government loan program that bears his name.

What all these men had in common besides being Republican was that they voted their consciences rather than the party line. Often, that meant they ran counter to the GOP's stance on many issues. But in the end, they did what was best for Vermont rather than what was best for the party. That is the political philosophy that has long been a part of the Vermont tradition.

Jeffords' decision to leave the GOP was in keeping with that tradition. He had battled with the Bush administration over education funding, particularly the federal government's commitments to special education and sided with the Senate Democrats in support of \$1.35 trillion tax cut package that year that was smaller than the \$1.6 trillion that Bush sought.

The Bush administration saw Jeffords' action as an affront to its agenda, and the word went out that Jeffords was going to be punished for straying from the party line. With a bit more tact, Jeffords might have been persuaded to stay. Instead, the back-room talk of "payback" forced Jeffords to re-examine the place of a New England moderate in a party dominated by Sun Belt conservatives.

Bush's desire to maintain party discipline ultimately cost the GOP control of the Senate for the remainder of 2001 and 2002, which at the time of Jeffords' defection, was even split between the two parties, 50-50. Despite the anguished cries at the time by the conservative chattering class, most people in Vermont supported his decision. Jeffords has long been a popular politician in this state, and had he chose to run for another term, he would have

won easily. Only his advancing age and health concerns prevented him from doing so.

Jeffords leaves a Congress that is more bitterly divided than it has ever been. And the party he once so proudly represented -- the party of Aiken, Gibson, Flanders and Stafford -- has been replaced by a party without conscience that is devoted to no principle other than staying in power.

His work on education and environmental issues was considerable. His humility is rare among politicians. And he will be missed in Washington. He truly is the last of his kind in Vermont politics.